

#179 KEN TAYLOR: 47TH PURSUIT SQUADRON, WHEELER FIELD

Chris Conybeare (CC): . . . here with Ken Taylor. It's December 4, 1986. We're at the Sheraton Waikiki in Honolulu. It's about two PM. Mr. Taylor lives in Anchorage, Alaska. My name is Chris Conybeare and I'm being assisted by Dan Martinez.

Mr. Taylor, we're going to start the way we have with everybody else. It's, what was your name, rank and what were you doing on December 7, 1941?

Ken Taylor (KT): Well, my name is Ken Taylor, Kenneth M. Taylor. I was a [2nd]lieutenant in the Army [Air Corps]. I was stationed with the 47th Pursuit Squadron at Wheeler Field.

CC: And what kind of activity was the pursuit squadron involved in, generally before that time. What kinds of things were you fellas doing then?

KT: Well, at December 7, specifically, the 47th Pursuit Squadron was in training, gunnery training, and the airplanes were located at Haleiwa. And we were bivouacked there, as we frequently did, in tents and so forth, and being a weekend, some of us, at least, left Haleiwa and came back to the Wheeler Field in Honolulu, and so on.

CC: And where were you that morning?

KT: I was at Wheeler Field, in the B.O.Q., the Officers' Club.

CC: And so, can you just describe your routine, from when you first got up or . . .

KT: Well, of course, we were, as everybody that morning, we were awakened by the explosions. We'd been out rather late, most of us, and we heard these explosions and the first indications were, of course, that this could have been just an accident. But there were more than one, and we got outside and started looking around. I did and found that these were the Japanese airplanes, and they were, they had bombed Wheeler Field and were in the process of strafing it. And they were very low and they were strafing the, mainly, the flat line and our airplanes there, but they were also strafing the officers' club.

And so my reaction was to -- my plane's out at Haleiwa. So I simply got on the phone, which was very convenient. It was right in the hallway of the open patio of the Wheeler Field Officers Club. And I called the squadron at Haleiwa, and as the airplanes would strafe the club, you could go around the corner and the bullets would go down one hallway and when they'd come around the other way, you could go around the other side.

So that was it. And my car was parked right out in front of the officers' club and George Welsh and I were together at that time. And we were trying to determine how to get to the car, because the airplanes were strafing not, maybe, twenty-five feet above the car, you see. And George made a very humorous comment -- I think it might be of interest -- at that time. He says, "Well let's wait 'til we hear the burst of machine gun and then we'll run. The bullets are already behind us."

And that's what we did, and we got in my Buick and I drove. And it wasn't for a few miles down the road, it suddenly occurred to me. I said, "George, we heard the ones that were by us, but we didn't hear the next volley that the guy fired at us. That was kind of silly."

And he says, "It worked."

And it did. It took us about ten minutes to get out to Haleiwa and our airplanes were ready, and we got into the air, simple as that.

CC: Were any Japanese planes over Haleiwa at all?

KT: No. They had missed Haleiwa, if they even indeed knew that we were there. I doubt if they did. In any event, they didn't strafe the field, our planes weren't damaged. We got in them and off we went, the two of us.

CC: Yeah, you had another question?

Dan Martinez: It's been written that you and George were having a -- you were at a late night card game. Is that true?

KT: There was always a card game at the club there.

DM: Was it all night?

KT: And I frequently played in the card game, but I was not involved in a card game that night. Just came to Honolulu and had been out late and just the usual things.

CC: What kind of things did fellas do when you had a night off in Honolulu? What kinds of . . .

KT: Well, we'd come down to the -- there were only three hotels. The Royal Hotel, right here, where you are -- managed by Mr. Smart, as a matter of fact, who, god bless him, when the rest of the island ran out of whiskey, he had some. So he was -- and the Navy, with their wisdom, they let him run their officers' club, I think, in the Moana, after it became a rest home for the submariners. But we would go either to the Moana, or to Hickam Field, various different places. And that night we probably took 'em all in, because we'd been out in the field and went back very late to Wheeler.

DM: Is it true that you went to war in a tuxedo? Is that true?

KT: Partly. Because you might know, or you may not know, in those days, to have dinner in the officers' club, all officers wore a tuxedo, a dinner jacket, white dinner jacket and tuxedo pants, and so on, or our uniform.

DM: Bow tie?

KT: Oh, yeah, yeah. The works. And that's what I had on that evening, and I think you'll agree that when somebody, a man, is surprised, about the first thing he does is grab the nearest set of pants, and put 'em on. And the nearest to me happened to be my tuxedo pants. And so I had 'em on. That's what I flew in that morning.

CC: You got out to the field, your planes were ready to go or . . .

KT: They were ready.

CC: And was that because of the phone call you made, or . . .

KT: Yeah. The armor was there, they had it all armed and it worked beautifully. We went just as quickly as could be. I guess we were in the air in fifteen minutes.

CC: And where did you go? What was your first thought?

KT: Well, we started looking for the group of Japanese airplanes and flew down over Wheeler, and they weren't there so Then we started running into the B-17s that were coming in. And this was a little bit confusing because the B-17s were camouflaged and they had a different tail, rather than the straight ones that were here at the time, and I wasn't sure they were ours, to start with, and neither was George. And we pulled right up, first airplane that we came to, and I could tell they weren't shooting back and there wasn't any question in my mind that they were friendly airplanes, and I'm certainly glad I didn't shoot one of 'em down.

But that was the first group, and we just kept proceeding 'til we found a group beating up Ewa, same way they were doing Wheeler when I had left. They were all in a big single line, strafing the field. So George and I just got on the end of that line and went right up through it. And we had airplanes falling all over the place. And I really couldn't tell you which one of us got the first one.

CC: You really couldn't communicate with him, though, at that time?

KT: Oh yes.

CC: You were in radio communication with him?

KT: Right, but it wasn't all that good. In those days, the communications in our airplanes was marginal at best, but we were doing some communicating, and we were flying. As we later developed tactics, say, you know, line abreast, like this, rather than the old form, which is a very good way to do it, as we found out later in the war. And that was about it.

We both used up our ammunition completely, and then we both had the same idea. We had been separated, but back to Wheeler to get some more ammunition, simply because it was our home base. It was closest. And we knew the ammunition was all piled in that end hangar out there, because it was waiting to go to -- we had been doing bounce drills to go to Guam and -- not Guam, Midway -- and so on.

So he was already there. He had already gotten down and was parked, and I pulled up and parked beside him.

CC: Did you encounter any fire from, any friendly fire as you tried to come into Wheeler? Did everybody . . .

KT: Oh, you couldn't be silly enough to fly over Pearl Harbor by that time. They were firing at everything. And you could tell that there wasn't no enemy there, but they were doing a lot of firing. And I could see that very carefully, and I avoided it. I could see Pearl Harbor burning and there were no enemy airplanes there -- we'd have gone after 'em, but the best thing to do was to stay away from Pearl Harbor. But anyway . . .

CC: What condition was Wheeler in at that point?

KT: What's that?

CC: What condition was Wheeler in at that point?

KT: It was in pretty bad shape. It was burning, most of the hangars were burning. Most of the airplanes were burning, great number of them. They had been parked tail to tail and -- for out of sabotage -- rather than dispersal. So they were very vulnerable, and they took quite a beating as a result of it. But we were getting our ammunition, as a matter of fact, and a lot of advice from the brass who was -- having become brass, I know what advice they're prone to give, and they gave it to me.

DM: What type of advice was it?

KT: Oh, you know, this is, "What are you doing, flying this airplane? Why don't you disperse it," or do this, or do that.

Seemed to me like the best place for the airplane was up in the air. And while we were there, on the ground, getting this ammunition, the second wave of attacking aircraft came in and we looked down the pike, toward Pearl Harbor, and it was obvious that it was here they were again.

So George was already refueled. I'm not --- we didn't refuel, he was rearmed. So he got into the air very quickly. And they were still rearming mine, had one of these little dollies out in front and got the ammunition in. No problem. And I had the engine going, and all that sort of stuff. And everybody broke and ran, you know, left me kind of sitting there. And I don't blame them at all. There wasn't much they could do. But fortunately, in those days, Wheeler Field didn't have runways, it's just grass field. And I just gave it the gun, and jumped right over that little dolly, and I headed right toward the attacking airplanes. And that turned out to be -- if I had studied that out, it couldn't have been a better decision. For the simple reason, they couldn't get to me and lead me enough on a collis-- without running into the ground, and I could shoot at them before I got my wheels off the ground. Oh, and I did.

CC: You started shooting as you were still at the . . .

KT: I started shooting as I had my wheels leaving the ground. And then, you know, I was beginning to think it's fairly easy, if you know what you're doing. And so I did a SHAWN-DELL and got several good hits, and got right in on a guy's tail. And what I didn't know was that I wasn't on the end of that line. I was in the middle of it. And there was a guy behind me. And so it became pretty apparent then that the war was, you know, it's a two-way street. I was doing some hits, and he began to get some hits on me, through the canopy, through my arm, through -- ruined my tux pants. A few things like that. No

damage, though. It was just very fortunate. No hurt, really. And I was so excited that I didn't even turn my gun sight on. You know, I wasn't an old experienced pilot in those days, just eager and fairly well trained, but not experienced. And didn't really have to be.

CC: Was it the training that really took over?

KT: Mm?

CC: Was it the training that really took over in that case?

KT: Oh, I think so. We had awfully good flight instructors, not very many of them. There weren't many of us in the Air Force [*Army Air Corps*] in those days. I suppose I was one of the junior guys, and there were, what, 5,000 total. And not very many officers. All the officers would be that many.

So we had good training. I had a good squadron commander. He had convinced all of us that there was going to be a war.

CC: So you really felt there would be a war?

KT: Oh yes. I did indeed. Gordon Austin was the 47th [*Pursuit*] Squadron commander and a good friend of mine until today. I'm sorry he isn't over here. He lives in Washington, retired major general. And it was --- he had convinced us that we're not here just playing. You'd better learn what you're doing and if you didn't know how to do it, he got rid of you.

CC: And you discovered yourself in the middle of it that morning. What happened after that first time? How many times did you go around and get more ammunition? How, how . . .

KT: Oh, that was all. They were gone by then. We used up the second load. By that time, we had chased them out to sea -- as far as we --- until we ran out of ammunition, and I went back, and this time went back to Haleiwa. And I started figuring out what -- try to mount some sort of a mission here with a bomber or two, to go out and get the fleet. But that didn't materialize. We didn't have any bombers to speak of, that was the problem.

CC: Did you think you knew where the fleet was?

KT: Oh, I knew damn well where it was. Why wouldn't you know? These people didn't have any gasoline to just wander around. I followed them a long way.

DM: How far did you follow them to sea?

KT: Oh, I followed them out maybe twenty miles, or something like that, shooting at 'em and doing all that. I'd get one smoking and I was trying to put him down. And . . .

DM: How many planes between you and George were down, do you think? What's the record showing?

KT: Well, they credited him with four, they credited me with two and two probables, and then later changed that to four, as I understand it, because, obviously, they lost that many. And they --- we didn't have gun cameras, so

for the most part, they went out, and if they could find 'em in the pineapple fields, they gave you a kill. If you were chasing one out to sea and finally had to turn around because you were out of ammunition, he was smoking. Well, my bet is that he went down, but . . .

DM: How many do you think you shot down?

--: Could you stop?

CC: You ready to stop?

--: Yes.

CC: We're going to change tape.

(Taping stops, then resumes.)

KT: . . . what difference does it make?

DM: Do you know what type of aircraft these were?

KT: No, they were all dive bombers. The Mitsubishi . . .

DM: They all . . .

KT: Yeah, the fixed landing gear. That was very fortunate I didn't run into any of the Zeroes, at that time.

DM: The ones that shot at you was inbound too?

KT: Well, they were in a line, you see. Well, I assume it is. I have -- pretty hard for me to tell. It could have been a Zero, very easily, but . . .

DM: My interview . . .

(Taping stops, then resumes.)

CC: Just keep going, huh?

--: Hold on a second. (Pause) Okay, any time.

CC: I have a question about that. How close did you actually get to the enemy aircraft in those days? Could you see the people in the other planes, or what was it like? How far away did all this action take place?

KT: Oh, I would get just about from here to that door.

CC: So twenty, thirty feet away?

KT: Just right up there. I could see the rear gunner and I knew I had him, 'cause then you still got to get the airplane down and it's peculiar. On some occasion, you take one little burst and boy, bang, a big fire. And other times, you just tearing the pieces off the airplane. You can't get it to explode. But, I mean, I suppose that's just the way it is in any event.

CC: And the kind of aircraft you were engaged with, was . . .

KT: Was a two-seater dive bombers, VAL's, I think they called 'em. And they were very slow, very, very vulnerable. They had a gun in the back that was shooting at me, but they weren't doing any damage. And though I didn't engage any Zeroes that I knew of. Now, the guy on my tail may have been one, and I didn't know it.

CC: You say you knew which direction the fleet was, but there seem to be some confusion and at least indecision about that amongst others. Were you able to report any of . . .

KT: Oh, I came right home and reported to the people. I said, "Look, let's head out here. These people were taking off, obviously, to go back to their ships, in that direction."

And as you recall, they were going right, they came in right by Ewa, went right on out in that direction, and those airplanes that were -- well, one of 'em, I think, ended out on Niihau. And so --- which seemed to me that the fleet should have been in that direction, had we have had a bomber, a bomber force, I think we would have found 'em.

CC: But yet we understand that when they tried to deploy and search for the fleet, they actually searched south at first.

KT: Well, I don't really know, because I wasn't involved in that. About that time, the flight surgeon came up and he started picking these things out of my arms and legs, and the shrapnel. And I didn't fly any more missions that day. I wasn't too . . .

CC: How long did . . . did you realize that you'd been wounded, or was it something that really set in after you . . .

KT: Actually, I didn't think I'd been wounded. I thought --- and it did, the bullet that came through the canopy missed my head slightly, and it hit this little stabilization, where you would trim your airplane, right by my arm. I didn't realize it had gone through my arm. And then it exploded and made one heck of a racket in the airplane, and that brought everybody back to their senses, at least it brought me back to my senses. And for, oh, weeks later, I didn't notice it until I started pulling my pants on. I'd have these pieces of shrapnel that would work out. And just little slivers, nothing dangerous, but a little painful when you pulled 'em out.

CC: Were you hospitalized?

KT: No.

CC: Just put a dressing on it?

KT: They just gave me the Purple Heart [*Medal*], that's all.

CC: (Chuckles) How did --- did you have a chance to think about what you were doing at all, or was it just the kind of thing you just have to go do it? I mean . . .

KT: Well, we, I think, acted -- at least George and I, and the rest of 'em -- there were others involved in this. They didn't have the fortunate, good fortune that we did to have our airplanes parked off at, in a field that, unknown to the Japanese. And so we had a big advantage there. And certainly the people at Wheeler, and the people, the others that got off had a much more difficult time of it, because they were under attack. And there were others and I, -- if we'd just all been up, we'd had an awful lot of good pilots here, and -- far better than I was -- and it would have been a very costly day indeed, I'm sure, for the Japanese, had we really been on the alert, waiting for 'em.

CC: As a military man, what do you think of the way the Japanese executed their attack?

KT: Oh, beautifully done, beautifully done. They only made one mistake, in my mind. They missed the carriers, and the battleships, as it turns out, weren't to play that big a part in the war. All the engagements, as I recall, naval engagements were airplane to ship, rather than ship to ship fire, at that point. They made a big mistake.

CC: They didn't . . .

KT: And of course, we were lucky, our carriers were out at sea, close by.

CC: They didn't launch another attack either, right.

KT: I can't imagine why they didn't, quite frankly. I sure expected it and we were on the alert. We got on the alert very quickly and kept our planes at Haleiwa. And everybody was rather, shall we say, excited. And I expected an attack. As a matter of fact, I couldn't figure out why they weren't going to put some troops ashore, quite frankly.

CC: What did things look like from your vantage point, in terms of the damage that had been done to our fields and our ships, and our forces? What could you observe while you were . . .

KT: Well, they just, a lot of damage. I can't be anything but complimentary in the damage that they did, considering the types of airplanes. These were dive bombers for the most part, and strafing. And they worked over a lot of airplanes and they worked over a lot of ships. And they did a beautiful job on it, tactically and militarily speaking. I think they should have followed it up, and I think they should have gone for the carriers, but they didn't and that cost 'em.

CC: You ever had a chance to meet any of the people that were on the other side and discuss any of these things, as former enemies, or did you ever?

KT: Well, I met one -- I've forgotten his name -- one of the dive bomber pilots. It was in Anchorage because he later participated in the Aleutian campaign, and he was there and as a matter of fact, a friend of mine had him to breakfast and knew I'd been over here. So he -- we had breakfast together and chatted a little bit about the attack.

CC: Did you --- how do you feel about that, I mean, in terms of the people that once were the enemy? Do you . . .

KT: Well, I think most of us were rather bitter and, initially, but from a military career, military person, I certainly didn't blame any of the military people involved. They didn't start this war, somebody else did. And I must say that I, later on, I had a few of 'em under my charge as prisoners of war when I commanded an outfit in the Philippines. And they could accomplish a lot. They were doers. They, once the surrender took place, these guys were workers and head down and bottom up. And you couldn't help but admire them, to a degree.

CC: There were some questions about the events of the day that, including the number of planes that might have gotten off at Wheeler or not. Did you observe any other P-40s that got off from Wheeler?

KT: Wheeler?

CC: Yeah.

KT: Well, since I didn't initially take off from Wheeler -- I took off from Haleiwa -- the answer to that question is no. I saw no other airplanes take off at all. There were others, because I knew the people involved later. There were some took off from Barbers Point, or Bellows, and I'm sure there were airplanes that were left at Wheeler, in between the times that I was in the air or something of that nature. No, there were a number of people that I can name that got up, and engaged the enemy. As I say, they didn't have the advantage of being at Haleiwa.

DM: I'd like two points clarified. First of all, how many planes were out at Haleiwa in your group?

KT: Well, an entire squadron and . . .

DM: That consisted . . .

KT: Give or take one or two, there were twenty-five airplanes out there. Now, this was a mixture of airplanes. We didn't have a full complement of P-40s. This was the new airplane in those days. We had P-36s and we even had a few old P-26s around that we flew. And so on down the line, we had, let's see, a B-10 or something that we towed targets with and shot. But there were twenty odd fighter airplanes out there, as I recall. It was a good squadron. Now, keep in mind, we had two groups, four squadrons each. We had a lot of airplanes here. And we'd have done a lot of damage had we have all been on the alert.

CC: Other pilots just couldn't get back to Haleiwa, was that the problem?

KT: 'Cause Sunday morning, you know. I can recall that my squadron commander, Gordon Austin, 'til this day, chides himself for him being out and in bivouac position at Haleiwa. He debated time, over and over again, "Well, what should we do for the weekend? Keep everybody on the ball out here and do it, or shall we let we everybody go to town and I'll go over," and he went over to Hawaii, hunting. And 'til this day, he rues that because if he'd [have] kept everybody right there, we'd have had twenty-five airplanes, twenty-five pilots, instead of two. And he's right. But . . .

CC: Hindsight, huh?

DM: I -- what -- I would like you to comment on this. Probably what most Americans, when they think of your name and Welch, they remember the scene in "*Tora, Tora, Tora*". How accurate was that scene, the way it was filmed and depicted what happened?

KT: Well, I think it was, by and large, fairly accurate. This business at the officers' club and all the prelim and being banned off to Haleiwa or someplace, whatever that was, was Hollywood. We had our problems, young lieutenants in those days, that I won't go into, but it wasn't quite accurate in this case. We had a very understanding C.O. And they seemed to want to take my Buick sedan and make it into a convertible. And if you'll notice, they wanted everybody to wear wool shirts and wool pants, and that wasn't the way you did it in Hawaii. You had khaki, that's all. And I was over here and made a comment or two, but I'm afraid they saw fit not to The aerial photography, I thought was superb, very good and very accurate. And the pilots that were doing the dog fighting were, you know, that's about the way it was done, so it was all right. I got very few

I might say that scene at Wheeler Field, where the airplanes were trying to take off and were strafed, it was even more thrilling watching the filming, then it was watching the real thing because apparently the wind changed. I was standing by the cameras with my family, my wife, and my daughter, and here comes the airplane. It's supposed to go down like this, but the wind changed. And the first thing you know, if you think back on the picture, he's going through this other line of airplanes, and they were exploding in all directions, and he was working his way pretty close to the cameras. And I thought, "Well, it would be rather stupid to get killed out here making a picture of this thing. I better get back off the field." And we did.

But, no I think it was a good film. Well done, on both sides of it.

DM: Can you describe your relationship with George Welch?

KT: Well, we stayed in contact, as I told you, for a number of years. He went to New Guinea, and I later -- before I did, he left here. He also went on a bond tour, back, and then into New Guinea. I went to Guadalcanal. As a matter of fact, took a flight of P-40s off of a carrier, which was the first time that had been done on a short converted liberty ship, to Guadalcanal. He went to New Guinea and we stayed in contact after he became a test pilot, chief test pilot for North American. Knew his wife well, knew his family. Went back to -- he was from Delaware. His father was in the Dupont business. And the governor honored him back there and I was present for that. And as I mentioned to you earlier, I was en route from -- I was stationed at Washington D.C. -- and I was en route to try to get George to give up the active part of flying when he was killed in -- forgot the date -- testing the F-100. And I've always been a little sorry that we didn't try to make that move a little sooner, 'cause the airplane just simply came apart on him. He had nothing to do with it. He was a good pilot. And that was about it.

(Taping stops, then resumes.)

CC: Yeah, one account says that you, has you rearming more than once, as I remember.

KT: Well, it was more arm than . . .

CC: You came in more than once to rearm and . . .

KT: No, no, no.

DM: Just once to rearm at Wheeler.

KT: Once. Keep in mind, we had four thirty-calibers and two fifty-calibers in that P-40. It was quite a bit of armament in that airplane.

DM: The question I have, on the second time that you -- after you rearmed and took off, and he took off ahead of you, and you were going down the runway and firing as you were rolling, did you see him any more after that, or were you on your own, or did you team up together?

KT: I didn't see him until I got back, although he picked the guy off that was on my tail. So he saw all this happening, and picked the guy right off my tail, and dumped him right up by Wheeler Field. So we went right on about our business on that. So . . .

DM: Where did you fly to from that point?

KT: Well, that point on, I was chasing 'em out toward -- they were headed for the ocean then and so we simply took after them, that's all, 'til again, he used up that load of ammunition, and that was no use going any further.

DM: When you took off from Haleiwa, do you know what time it was, by any chance?

KT: I really don't know, but it was about five minutes to eight when I started, left Wheeler Field. So I would guess something like 8:15, 8:10, something like that. They hit Wheeler just before eight o'clock.

CC: Think that's it.

KT: Anything else?

CC: No, that's it.

END OF INTERVIEW